

The publication of the European Journal of Geography (EJG) is based on the European Association of Geographers' goal to make European Geography a worldwide reference and standard. Thus, the scope of the EJG is to publish original and innovative papers that will substantially improve, in a theoretical, conceptual, or empirical way the quality of research, learning, teaching, and applying geography, as well as in promoting the significance of geography as a discipline. Submissions are encouraged to have a European dimension. The European Journal of Geography is a peer-reviewed open access journal and is published quarterly.

Received: 23/10/2025

Revised: 18/02/2026

Accepted: 25/03/2026

Published: 03/04/2026

Editor:

Dr. Alexandros Bartzokas-Tsiompras

DOI: 10.48088/ejg.j.bot.17.1.121.138

ISSN: 1792-1341

E-ISSN: 2410-7433



Copyright: © 2026 by the authors.

Licensee European Association of Geographers (EUROGEO). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license.



Research Article

Lost in Geography: Croatia's Identity Crisis

Jurica Botić ¹✉

¹ Dr. Franjo Tuđman Defense and Security University, Ilica 256 b, HR-10000 Zagreb, Croatia

✉ Correspondence: jurica.botic@sois-ft.hr

Abstract: Historically situated at the geographic crossroads of former Austro-Hungarian and Venetian territories along the westernmost Ottoman border and having experienced two Yugoslav states in the 20th century, contemporary Croatia is shaped by diverse spatial identity influences. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of border identities and regional institutionalisation, this paper explores the identity profiling of modern Croatia within the context of European regionalisation. The research employs a methodological triangulation of diverse discursive sources—including an analysis of geography textbooks, official state documents, and tourism branding—contrasted with media reports and an extensive public survey conducted among a sample of 456 respondents. Specifically, Croatia's official discourse prioritises its affiliation with the Central European and Mediterranean spheres while strategically marginalising the Balkan context often using Southeast Europe as a more neutral geopolitical substitute. Conversely, the findings reveal a layered identity construct among the public, where Mediterranean, Central European, and Balkan geo-cultural spheres overlap. The results suggest that contemporary Croatia functions as a geographic transition zone where multiple regional frameworks interweave into a multidimensional sense of place, without the territory being fixed within a single regional entity.

Keywords: Croatia; European regionalisation; border identities; transition zone; geo-cultural spheres

Highlights:

- A gap exists between official discourse and public perception of Croatia's regional affiliation.
- Croatia functions as a geographic transition zone with overlapping regional spheres.
- The strategic significance of Mediterranean rebranding for Croatia.

1. Introduction

The territory of contemporary Croatia is shaped by its historical role as a frontier, a concept central to its place identity. Identity is not a static location but a relationship between people and places constructed through historical layers (Relph, 2008). In antiquity, this area marked the boundary between the Western and Eastern Roman Empires, a division that solidified into the cultural fault line between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. During the early modern period, Croatia functioned as a civilisational border separating the Habsburg and Venetian spheres from the Ottoman Empire. Such historical layers contribute to the institutionalisation of a region, where imperial borders often reinforce differences between ethnolinguistically related groups (Paasi, 2009).

The collapse of large multi-ethnic empires and the formation of Yugoslavia temporarily removed these borders from the political map, yet cultural and political differences persisted, ultimately contributing to the state's dissolution. This resilience of regional affiliations, despite changing institutional frameworks, has profoundly influenced Croatian national development. Consequently, the paper explores the identity profiling of contemporary Croatia within the context of European regionalisation, examining its alignment with Central European, Mediterranean, or Balkan geo-cultural spheres.

Croatia's regional affiliation remains complicated by the Cold War's binary division of Europe. Seeking to affirm a pro-Western orientation, contemporary Croatia strategically distances itself from Eastern or Balkan labels, promoting a Central European and Mediterranean image through the educational system (Magaš, 2013). The state utilises place branding to shape its identity (Anholt, 2010; Kavatzis et al., 2015), aligning with public diplomacy efforts to influence global perceptions (Melissen, 2005). Within this framework, Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans function as symbolic geo-cultural clusters rather than fixed entities. Central Europe is conceptualised through Habsburg heritage and institutional order (Glamuzina & Fuerst-Bjeliš, 2015); the Mediterranean as a civilisational anchor of Ancient and Venetian legacies (Matvejević, 2007); and the Balkans as a contested space of geopolitical "otherness" (Todorova, 2006).

The primary objective of this research is to analyse multi-layered regional perceptions of Croatia through a triangulation of discursive sources and empirical data. Drawing on the border identities framework, the study addresses a key research question: *How do official institutional narratives—specifically state policy and educational curricula—relate with or diverge from contemporary public perceptions?* The hypothesis posits that contemporary Croatia lacks a singular regional self-perception, instead functioning as a geographic transition zone where multiple regional identities overlap without entirely belonging to a single entity.

2. Literature Review

Although it is necessary to highlight the key determinants of Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans, it is not possible to resolve all ambiguities surrounding their spatial scope, as these regions are defined by both culture and geography. From a theoretical perspective, their formation can be examined through the lens of "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983). Although originally linked to nation-building, this concept has been extended to regions constructed through discursive practices and shared narratives. This process is complemented by the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012), whereby selected cultural symbols legitimise regional belonging.

In this context, Croatia represents a "border identity" (Paasi, 2019), shaped through the process of "regional institutionalisation". Regions are not natural entities but socially constructed through political, media, and educational discourses, particularly visible in "In-between Europe" (Kuus, 2014; Tunjić, 2004; Zarycki, 2014), where regional affiliation is constantly renegotiated. Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš (2015) emphasise the absence of clear geographical definitions of both Central Europe and the Balkans. The term Balkans originated largely within European—initially German—geography as a substitute for the geopolitical vacuum following the Ottoman Empire's withdrawal. Central Europe, by contrast, was historically defined by political and cultural influences but lost coherence after World War II and the bipolar division of Europe, which marginalised it in public discourse.

The Mediterranean implies a framework beyond Europe. Matvejević (2007) argues it is not a unified ethnographic or religious space but one defined by a common mentality and a unique relationship with space. Writing from a perspective of Mediterranean humanism during the 1990s crises, Matvejević positioned the region as a cultural *longue durée*—a historically layered space transcending national borders. Unlike Central Europe's recognisable cultural environment, the Mediterranean is heterogeneous and climatically conditioned, yet unified by spatial logic. This reflects placemaking and the bordering of space (Scott & Sohn, 2018), where cultural and historical layers are utilised to construct specific regional identities.

The ambiguity of the Balkans' "natural" border was acknowledged by Jovan Cvijić, who used an "anthropogeographical" approach to promote a unified South Slavic core, downplaying Croatian political and cultural traditions to justify a Serbian-led state. Cvijić argues that the Kupa-Rijeka border was inconvenient because "it cuts through a homogeneous ethnic group", ignoring distinct Croatian and Serbian identities (1922, p. 8). This peninsular theory served as a geopolitical role, presenting Yugoslavia as a framework for integrating South Slavs into a unit centred on Serbia. This perspective marginalised the historical layers and cultural differences that scholars like Todorova (2006) identify as crucial to understanding regional frictions.

None of these regions have clearly defined borders, especially when reconciled with existing political boundaries. Since Croatia exists at their intersection, external perspectives are vital. Slovenian geographer Zupančič (2015) includes Croatia in the Balkan countries but excludes Slovenia, while Tunjić (2004) includes both. Such variations reflect the politics of image construction (Anholt, 2010), where regional labelling is not merely descriptive but carries symbolic significance. Furthermore, regional brand identities are increasingly viewed as a process of multi-level governance, where institutional actors negotiate spatial narratives to construct a unified regional image (Lu et al., 2020). This is

reflected in how historical and cultural symbols are strategically embedded in public spaces to reinforce specific regional identities, revealing political priorities of urban governance (de Jong & Lu, 2022).

This process is inherently linked to placemaking, where territorial identity is constructed through a strategic selection of discourses that can lead to rigid regional stereotypes (Banini & Ilovan, 2021). Through a social semiotics approach, it is possible to reveal how regional identities are branded even in contested spatial contexts by utilising symbolic resources to negotiate perceived divisions (Sohn, 2022). This resonates with what Melegh (2006) describes as discursive hierarchies, which shape how states and ethnic groups are positioned in relation to dominant civilisational norms. Research on Southeast Europe (Săgeată & Crețan, 2025), shows how ethnic legacies and administrative structures shape regional organisation. In this context, identity claims are central to power negotiations, often characterised by fragile institutional balances (Stroschein, 2012). Empirical research on ethnic and religious identity groups further demonstrates how their spatial distribution intersects with administrative structures and political competition (Rotaru et al., 2023).

Italian geopolitical expert Jean (2012) includes Croatia in the Balkans but emphasises that, due to historical links to Central Europe, it does not form a single geopolitical system with the rest of the region. Conversely, the American geographer Cohen (2003, p. 218) classifies all former Yugoslav states as the Balkans “historically and politically”, reflecting a persistent Cold War binary. Notably, Cohen excludes Greece and Turkey from this Balkan label, categorising them as “part of Maritime Europe”, which highlights the political rather than geographic nature of his classification. From a Russian perspective, Dugin (2017, p. 91) places Croats within “Greater Eastern Europe” but specifically identifies Croatia and Bosnia as the “most Western and Atlanticist” zones of the Balkans (2004, p. 301).

Todorova (2006) also insists on Croatia’s Balkan status, not by minimising cultural differences, but by negating their positive aspects—suggesting that all Balkan groups are equally bad in distinct ways. This contrasts with Todorova’s initial premise regarding on the unfounded degradation of the Balkan image. The 1991–1995 War of Independence further intensified this; as Baker (2010) explores, the conflict constructed the enemy as a Balkan Other in opposition to a Mediterranean and Central European Croatia.

Croatian authors offer a necessary internal perspective. Tomić-Koludrović and Petrić (2007) observe a discrepancy between European politicians’ Balkan identification of Croatia and visitors’ perception of its Mediterranean and Central European cultural artefacts. This led to strategic nation- and destination-branding efforts in the 21st century. Rivera (2008) notes that post-war tourism marketing minimised references to the conflict, emphasising Mediterranean and European heritage to improve international reputation. Public diplomacy efforts, such as UNESCO inscriptions (e.g., *klapa* singing) and Rijeka’s 2020 European Capital of Culture status, reinforce this trajectory of bordering and placemaking. According to King et al. (2025), such regional development is driven by a strategic alignment of tourism and culture to redefine territorial boundaries. Petrović, Bilić and Fila (2022) found that citizens primarily identify Croatia as Mediterranean, though Balkan affiliation correlates with political preferences—centre-right voters (HDZ) reject the label, while centre-left voters (SDP) are more inclined to accept it.

Rihtman-Auguštin (1999, p. 113) emphasises the Adriatic coast as a “defence against the Balkans”, while Čaleta (1999) identifies music as the most prominent Mediterranean element of national culture. Baker (2010) confirms that music acts as a site for negotiating identity, emphasising Europeanness over Balkanism. However, Čaleta warns that promoting national symbols, like the *tamburica*, sometimes occurs at the expense of regional ones like the mandolin, reflecting internal tensions in national homogenisation. This internal friction illustrates a risk of “geomisguidance” (Morgado, 2023), where an ambiguous spatial perception limits the state’s ability to translate its diverse identity into a recognizable and stable international position.

3. Materials and Methods

To determine official national policy regarding Croatia’s regional affiliation, this study conducts a two-level content analysis. The first level examines nine geography textbooks to ensure a comprehensive vertical overview of the national curriculum. This selection includes primary school (Gambiroža et al., 2020; Orešić et al., 2020; Orešić et al., 2021), secondary school (Čokonaj & Feletar, 2014; Čokonaj & Vuk, 2014; Gal et al., 2021;), and university textbooks (Curić et al., 2013; Glamuzina & Fuerst-Bjeliš, 2015; Magaš, 2013). The selection criteria for these titles were based on their status as the most widely used and officially representative materials across all educational levels. These were analysed, as their content covers the geography of Croatia in various contexts—from regional to applied, most often tourism geography. The analysis utilised a deductive coding approach where approaches to regionalisation served as the primary

coding unit, specifically focusing on explicit mentions of Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans (or South-east Europe). The coding logic relied on cross-referencing these explicit labels with their descriptive and cartographic contexts to ensure analytical consistency. Findings were derived through a systematic review of textual definitions, regional classifications, and cartographic representations, ensuring that each textbook's positioning was recorded based on its explicit instructional content. The textbooks, in use during the 2024/2025 school year, reflect official educational policies, as they are selected within a competitive publishing market while also requiring formal state approval.

The second level analyses five indicative state acts to identify Croatia's official regional positioning. The selection criteria were based on the documents' legal hierarchy and strategic relevance, encompassing the Constitution as the foundational legal act alongside key development strategies enacted following Croatia's 2013 EU accession. The analysis focused exclusively on explicit regional designations rather than the substantive context of the documents. The sample includes the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette, 85/10), the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette, 73/17), the National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (Official Gazette, 13/21), the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030 (Official Gazette, 2/23) and the National Plan for the Development of Culture and Media for the period from 2023 to 2027. The coding logic followed the same systematic approach as the first level, ensuring that regional positioning was identified through consistent terminological verification across all strategic policies. These documents represent strategic policies enacted around or after Croatia's 2013 EU accession.

To examine tourism branding, content analysis was conducted on fifteen official promotional videos from the Croatian National Tourist Board available on YouTube in April 2025. The selection criteria included all official national-level promotional videos active during the study period to ensure a comprehensive cross-section of the then-current branding strategy. While providing a vertical overview of promotional narratives, this analysis is limited to specific visual campaigns; thus, the findings represent indicative trends in official branding rather than an exhaustive longitudinal study. Unlike the state acts, these videos were analysed using a dual-coding approach. Explicit content referred to literal regional naming, while implicit content was identified through geo-cultural indicators: Central European affiliation was coded via continental urban architecture, Baroque heritage, and Central European lifestyle; Mediterranean affiliation was identified through maritime landscapes, Roman and Venetian heritage, and Mediterranean agriculture. The coding logic followed a systematic categorisation where these visual signifiers were recorded based on their presence and frequency, allowing for a structured interpretation of implicit branding narratives. This analysis correlates tourism regions with traditional identity patterns to identify dominant branding narratives aimed at generating economic profit.

Between January and April 2025, a total of 23 reports from three daily newspapers—*Jutarnji list* (Zagreb), *Slobodna Dalmacija* (Split), and *Glas Slavonije* (Osijek)—were reviewed to achieve an even representation of various perspectives based on different regional headquarters. The selection criteria for these specific outlets focused on their status as leading regional dailies, ensuring that the analysis captures diverse geographical discourses within the national media space. Given the specific timeframe and sample size, these findings should be interpreted as indicative trends in contemporary regional positioning rather than an exhaustive longitudinal study. Following the dual-coding approach, the analysis identified direct regional labelling (explicit content) and contextual indicators (implicit content). The coding logic consistently applied the thematic matrix across all reports, where contextual indicators were cross-referenced with the primary narrative to ensure an objective classification of regional affiliations. Thematic classification was based on the report's primary context: political (institutional policies), economic (trade and tourism), cultural (heritage and lifestyle), and natural-geographic (climatic and landscape characteristics). Articles applying regional positioning across multiple contexts were coded under all relevant categories to capture discursive complexity. Beyond the frequency of classifications, the study examined the correlation between specific regional labels and their applied contexts to determine which thematic aspects drive particular regional positionings.

Finally, a survey questionnaire was conducted via Google Forms in January and February 2025 to determine the inclination of Croatian citizens towards various European regional identities. Utilising a snowball non-probability convenience sampling strategy via social media and digital networks, responses were collected from 456 participants. To interpret identification patterns, it is necessary to outline how each region of origin is culturally coded: Central Croatia and Slavonia are situated within the Central European circle (Habsburg legacy), while Dalmatia, Istria, and Primorje are defined by Mediterranean ties and Venetian influence. In contrast, Lika and Gorski Kotar are coded through their historical role as the Military Frontier towards the Ottoman Empire; this border position and harsh mountain climate established them as a key contact point with the Balkan sphere, shaping a distinct frontier identity. Zagreb is treated as a

separate category—a demographic melting pot where Central European, Mediterranean, and Balkan codes are pragmatically blended. These cultural codes are not rigid; for instance, a notable contrast between Mediterranean and Balkan influences exists along the coast-hinterland axis in Dalmatia, a dynamic further elaborated in the discussion.

Prior to participating, respondents were informed of the study's scientific purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the anonymity and confidentiality of the data. Informed consent was obtained electronically through the voluntary submission of the questionnaire. The multi-dimensional instrument comprised 17 questions divided into two thematic blocks; the first (Questions 1–8) established the sociodemographic profile, while the second (Questions 9–17) utilised a matrix-based logic to explore Croatia's regional affiliation through nine distinct dimensions: self-identification, emotional pride, perceived cultural similarity, ethno-linguistic ties, shared history, personal mobility, consumption of popular culture, perceived cultural hierarchy, and external European perception. The selection of these dimensions was based on the premise that regional identity is a complex construct comprising both symbolic elements (e.g., historical ties) and functional elements (e.g., personal mobility, popular culture consumption). This design captured bottom-up experiential factors, testing the hypothesis that practical interaction with a specific geo-cultural sphere correlates with a stronger affiliation. The core logic was to move beyond simple categorical choice and measure the intensity of affiliation across multiple geo-cultural spheres. To achieve this, a matrix-based approach used a 5-point Likert scale (1 – Not at all to 5 – Very much) for respondents to evaluate their connection to Central Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans independently. This ensured the questionnaire did not insist on exclusive selection but rather allowed for the expression of overlapping or multiple regional identities, essential for capturing the complexity of Croatia's position.

The sample consisted of 456 respondents (Table 1), predominantly female (73.5%) and aged 31–60 (86.4%), while only 4.6% were aged 18–30. The sample was ethnically homogeneous (94.3% Croats) and highly educated, with 91.6% holding undergraduate or graduate degrees and 6.6% secondary education. Economically, the sample reflects a middle-income bracket: 39.9% earn 1,500–2,000 EUR and 34.4% earn 1,000–1,500 EUR monthly. Religious affiliation was primarily Catholic (86%), with 5.5% atheists. Regional representation included Dalmatia (30%), Central Croatia excluding Zagreb (25.9%), Slavonia and Baranja (21.5%), followed by Zagreb (11.5%), Istria and Primorje, and Gorski Kotar and Lika. The author acknowledges the underrepresentation of Zagreb as a limitation of the convenience sample; thus, findings represent indicative regional perspectives rather than a nationally representative sample. Furthermore, the study contains a conceptual limitation by focusing exclusively on the internal perspective of identity. By prioritising this bottom-up approach, the research captures how identity is constructed and perceived from within the national context, rather than attempting to account for external views of Croatia. The relationship between sociodemographic variables and core research themes was examined using chi-square tests, while correlation tests identified significant patterns among responses. Other statistical methods were not utilised, as they were deemed unsuitable given the specific characteristics and distribution of the sample. Finally, to mitigate the inherent limitations of the convenience sampling strategy, the study emphasises methodological triangulation. By contextualising the survey findings alongside the results from state acts, textbooks, and media analysis, the research ensures that the final conclusions are grounded in a multifaceted dataset, allowing for a valid interpretation of regional identity patterns despite the inherent sampling constraints.

4. Results

4.1. Geography textbooks

All three analysed primary school geography textbooks define Croatia as a Central European and Mediterranean country. Although none identify it as a Balkan country, Orešić et al. (2020, pp. 40–41) emphasise a connection to this region by stating Croatia is located on the border of Southeast Europe. The terminology is indicative, signalling an avoidance of the Balkan name. In the high school textbooks, the approach is more diverse. Gal et al. (2021) omit any specific regional affiliation in the European context. Conversely, textbooks published by Meridijani (first author in both cases is Čokonaj) reaffirm the Central European and Mediterranean definition. Specifically, the textbook for gymnasiums and vocational schools includes the Danube region (Čokonaj & Feletar, 2014, p. 11), while the tourism school version limits itself to these two primary European regions (Čokonaj & Vuk, 2014, p. 9). Notably, the university textbook on the geography of tourism (Curić et al., 2013) discusses Croatia within world tourism without explicitly defining its regional affiliation. In contrast, Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš (2015, p. 21) in *Historical Geography of Croatia* state that “geographically,

Croatia belongs to the peripheral part of Southeast Europe, at the junction of the Mediterranean with Central Europe”. Within contemporary geopolitical developments and Euro-integration processes, these authors classify Croatia as part of Southeast Europe. Finally, Magaš’s university textbook *Geography of Croatia* (2013, p. 18) clearly defines Croatia as Central European and Mediterranean.

Table 1. Research sample structure

		<i>f</i>	%
Sex	Male	121	26.5
	Female	335	73.5
Age	18-30	21	4.6
	31-45	176	38.6
	46-60	218	47.8
	61+	41	9
Ethnicity	Croat	430	94.3
	Other	26	5.7
Education	High school	30	6.6
	Undergraduate or graduate study	418	91.6
	PhD	8	1.8
Personal income level	No personal income	5	1.1
	Up to 1000 EUR	8	1.8
	1000-1500 EUR	157	34.4
	1500-2000 EUR	182	39.9
	2000+	104	22.8
Religion	Catholic	392	86
	Other	54	8.5
	Atheist	25	5.5
Region of residence	Central Croatia (excluding Zagreb)	118	25.9
	Zagreb	53	11.5
	Slavonia and Baranja	98	21.5
	Dalmatia	137	30
	Istria and Primorje	42	9.2
	Gorski Kotar and Lika	8	1.8

4.2. Official state acts

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette, 85/10) does not explicitly state Croatia’s regional affiliation in the European context, yet the Balkans are the only region mentioned. Article 135, paragraph 2 “prohibits the initiation of the procedure of association of the Republic of Croatia in alliances with other states in which the association would lead, or could lead, to the restoration of the Yugoslav state unity, or a Balkan state union in any form”. In its introduction, the National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (Official Gazette, 73/17) defines Croatia as a “sovereign Central European, Danube, Adriatic and Mediterranean state”, while in the chapter relating to national identity, it is defined as a “European, and especially Mediterranean and Central European state”. Indicatively, the Strategy does not indicate a Balkan affiliation. Moreover, the Balkans are not explicitly mentioned, while the term Southeast Europe is used, but not as a term that encompasses Croatia in any sense. This region is categorised into a separate sub-chapter called “Southeastern Neighbourhood” within the “Security Environment” chapter, which implies that this region represents a security challenge for Croatia.

The National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (Official Gazette, 13/21) defines Croatia as a country “at the crossroads of Central Europe and the Mediterranean” that must strengthen partnerships with “other Central European and Mediterranean countries”. Paradoxically, this act announces that “Zagreb will be promoted

as the financial centre of Southeast Europe”, and that “Franjo Tuđman Airport in Zagreb will be positioned as the strongest regional air hub in Southeast Europe”. Although the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030 (Official Gazette, 2/23) distinguishes three climatic zones—Mediterranean, mountainous and continental—Croatia is still primarily defined as a Mediterranean country. The Mediterranean is the only European region explicitly mentioned, and Croatia is regularly compared to “other Mediterranean countries”, implying Croatia is one of them. Finally, the National Plan for the Development of Culture and Media for the period from 2023 to 2027 also defines Croatia as a Central European and Mediterranean country, stating that “cooperation programmes within regional initiatives and associations will be intensified, emphasising the specificity of Croatia as a Central European and Mediterranean country.”

Analysis of these five official acts shows that three define Croatia as both Central European and Mediterranean, prioritising Central Europe. Only the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030 implicitly defines Croatia as primarily Mediterranean. In none of the acts is Croatia defined as a Balkan or Southeast European country. However, the treatment of the Balkans or Southeast Europe, and even the use of one of these two terms, is very ambivalent in the three acts that refer to this region. Namely, contrary to the provided geographical definition of Croatia as a Central European and Mediterranean country, the National Development Strategy highlights Zagreb as a potential regional financial and transport centre of Southeast Europe. On the other hand, the Constitution and the National Security Strategy do not see Croatia as part of this region, noting that the Constitution explicitly prohibits any political association with the Balkan countries.

4.3. Tourism promotion

An analysis of fifteen short promotional videos of the Croatian National Tourist Board on YouTube in April 2025 reveals that content related to the Adriatic coast is overwhelmingly predominant. In five videos, only Adriatic Croatia is shown, while in seven, this Mediterranean area occupies the largest portion of the duration. Only three videos represent coastal Croatia evenly with other regions, and not a single video omits this most recognisable part of the country. Notably, this analysis specifically includes national-level materials, where a more centralised branding approach is expected compared to local or county boards’ materials.

Thematically, eleven videos present natural and cultural heritage equally. Of particular interest is the video *Croatia – the New Tourism Star of the European Union*, which utilises EU membership to position Croatia within a common European cultural and political space. Among other videos, one focuses on nature, one on cultural heritage, and two on gastronomy, especially Mediterranean. Regarding national branding, the musical background is also indicative: domestic music, mostly with typical Mediterranean rhythms, is presented in twelve videos. Foreign music appears in only two, while one video utilises classical music and the global popularity of the 2Cellos duo for tourism promotion.

4.4. Media reports

Three daily newspapers headquartered in different regional centres—the Zagreb-based *Jutarnji list*, Split-based *Slobodna Dalmacija* and Osijek-based *Glas Slavonije*—do not prioritise Croatia’s regional affiliation in the European context as a primary focus. Therefore, this affiliation is incidental, depending on the context of the media reports. Accordingly, the number of articles is relatively limited considering the observation period of four months. However, the Zagreb-based *Jutarnji list* leads in emphasising regional determinants, accounting for 16 articles (70%) of the sample, while *Slobodna Dalmacija* makes up 8.6% and *Glas Slavonije* 17.4%. Overall, half of the analysed articles classify Croatia as a Mediterranean country. Slightly less than a third see it as part of Southeast Europe (with the term Balkans used less frequently), while only 17.4% place it in a Central European context.

Individually, *Jutarnji list* primarily views Croatia as Mediterranean (62.5%), followed by Southeast Europe (25%) and Central Europe (12.5%). *Slobodna Dalmacija* completely avoids the Balkan context, with no articles placing Croatia in Southeast Europe. Instead, its reports are evenly split between Mediterranean (50%) and Central European (50%) affiliations. Conversely, *Glas Slavonije* is most inclined towards the Balkan region, associating Croatia with it in 60% of its reports, while Central Europe and the Mediterranean each account for 20%.

Thematic analysis shows that two-thirds of political articles link Croatia to Southeast Europe or the Balkans, while the remainder are split between Mediterranean and Central European contexts (16.7% each). In contrast, 60% of economic articles (primarily tourism-related) see Croatia as Mediterranean, 30% as Central European, and only 10% as part of Southeast Europe. Similarly, two-thirds of cultural articles place Croatia in Southeast Europe, with one-third seeing it

as Mediterranean and none linking it to Central Europe. Finally, a consensus exists regarding climate: all articles concerning climate change and meteorological conditions classify Croatia among Mediterranean countries.

4.5. Survey

Participants perceive Croatia as moderately part of Central Europe and the Balkans, while affiliation with the Mediterranean is viewed as somewhat stronger (Table 2). A chi-square test revealed that the only statistically significant difference concerned the Mediterranean affiliation. The tests regarding gender, religious affiliation, and region of residence (Figure 1, Table 3) were conducted as the sample was sufficiently heterogeneous in these cases. This statistical significance ($p = 0.001$) highlights Mediterranean affiliation as a key differentiating factor in regional identification. Age differences, examined via correlation test, showed that younger respondents express a stronger sense of belonging to the Balkans (slight negative correlation: $r = -0.211$; $p = 0.001$), whereas older respondents more frequently emphasise Central Europe (slight positive correlation: $r = 0.12$; $p = 0.005$). These correlations suggest a gradual generational shift in the regional perception.

Respondents from Dalmatia predominantly exhibit a strong sense of affiliation with the Mediterranean (109 out of 137), whereas residents of other regions express such affiliation at approximately half that rate ($\chi^2 = 81.431$; $df = 16$; $p = 0.001$). This confirms a strong geographical correlation, with Mediterranean identity being most prevalent in coastal regions, followed by Istria and Primorje. However, a surprisingly high finding—defined as a significant deviation from expected geographical proximity—is observed in Zagreb, where Mediterranean identification is notably higher than in other continental regions. Conversely, this identity is least felt in Lika and Gorski Kotar, and Slavonia and Baranja. Notably, no traditional Croatian region recorded a majority perception (>50%) of belonging to Central Europe or the Balkans. Central European affiliation is highest in Zagreb and Central Croatia, and the lowest in Lika and Gorski Kotar, and Istria and Primorje. Regarding the Balkans, while the identification is highest in Central Croatia and Slavonia and Baranja, a surprisingly high rate was found in Istria and Primorje. This diverges from common assumptions aligning that region primarily with Mediterranean or even Central European spheres. Finally, as a geographical transitional area, the least Balkan identification was found in Zagreb and Lika and Gorski Kotar, with the latter also exhibiting the least pronounced regional identity overall.

Table 2. Perceptions of Croatia’s affiliation with selected European regions

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Much	Very much	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Central Europe	6.1	19.3	41.7	24.5	8.3	3.1	1.005
Mediterranean	3.1	8.8	33.1	36.1	18.9	3.59	0.99
Balkans	12.1	21.9	23.4	28.1	14.5	3.11	1.246

Table 3. Perceptions¹ of Croatia’s affiliation with selected European regions based on regional differences within Croatia

	Central Europe	Mediterranean	Balkans
Central Croatia (excluding Zagreb)	34.7	40.7	46.6
Zagreb	43.4	52.8	32.1
Slavonia and Baranja	33.7	37.8	45.9
Dalmatia	30.7	79.6	40.1
Istria and Primorje	23.8	66.7	45.2
Lika and Gorski Kotar	12.5	12.5	37.5

¹ Note: Percentages were calculated based only on responses that indicated a significant sense of belonging to the selected regions (“much” and “very much”).

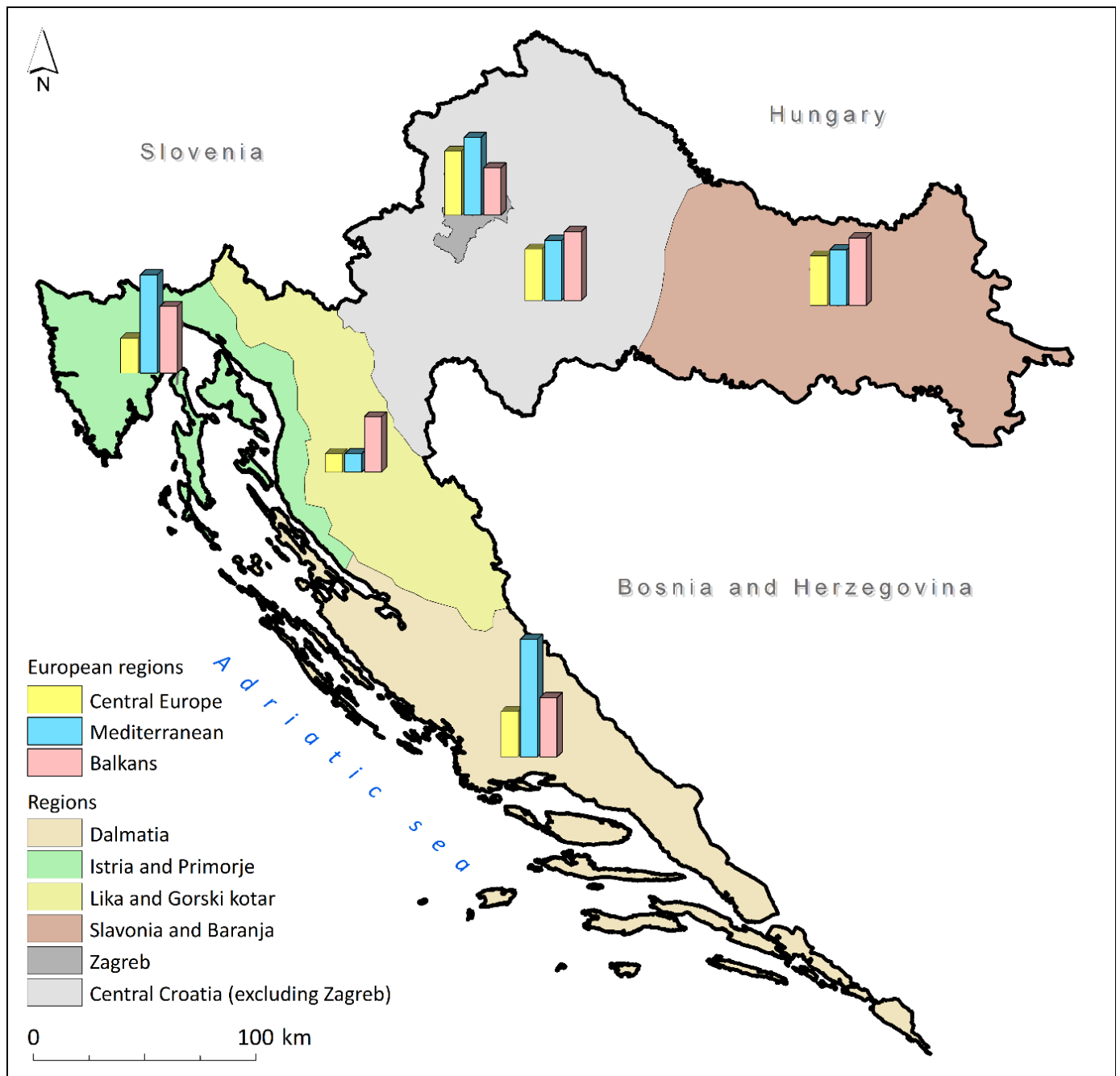


Figure 1. Croatia’s affiliation to European regions based on the region of residence

Regarding shared history, respondents perceive a moderately common background with Central Europe and the Mediterranean, but a much greater extent with the Balkans (Table 4). This reveals a discrepancy: while reserved about belonging to the Balkans, respondents clearly acknowledge historical ties as a factual reality ($M=3.92$). A chi-square test showed a statistically significant difference regarding the shared history of Croatia and the Mediterranean ($\chi^2 = 34.819$; $df = 16$; $p = 0.004$), confirming that the Mediterranean historical narrative is significantly more pronounced on the coast (Dalmatia) than in continental regions. Two-thirds of Dalmatian respondents believe Croatia and the Mediterranean share a common history, a view expressed less frequently elsewhere. A slight positive correlation was found between age and perceptions of a shared history between Croatia and Central Europe ($r = 0.113$; $p = 0.005$), indicating that older respondents were somewhat more likely to believe in a common historical background. Similarly, a slight negative correlation was found between age and perceptions of Croatia’s shared history with the Balkans ($r = -0.111$; $p = 0.005$), suggesting that younger respondents more often emphasise the idea of a shared history with this region.

Table 4. Shared history of Croatia and selected regions

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Much	Very much	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Central Europe	3.9	12.5	37.7	35.1	10.7	3.36	0.967
Mediterranean	1.1	11.4	36.8	39.3	11.4	3.48	0.879
Balkans	1.8	5	20.8	43.9	28.5	3.92	0.921

The results indicate a moderate frequency of respondents' travel to the specified regions (Table 5). The only statistically significant difference concerned age and travel frequency within the Balkans. Younger respondents reported travelling to this region more frequently than older individuals (slight negative correlation: $r = -0.133$; $p = 0.001$).

Table 5. Frequency of travel to selected regions

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Much	Very much	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Central Europe	8.6	21.3	38.8	23.9	7.6	3	1.046
Mediterranean	7	13.6	40.6	25.9	12.9	3.24	1.066
Balkans	22.8	27.9	28.9	14.7	5.7	2.53	1.159

Respondents report a moderate level of cultural product consumption from the selected regions (Table 6). The chi-square test revealed several statistically significant differences: men tend to consume Balkan cultural content somewhat more frequently ($\chi^2 = 12.478$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.014$), whereas women consume Central European content significantly more frequently ($\chi^2 = 14.569$; $df = 4$; $p = 0.006$). These findings indicate that cultural consumption patterns are partially influenced by gender. Furthermore, respondents from Dalmatia, Slavonia, Istria, and Primorje consume Mediterranean cultural products more frequently ($\chi^2 = 33.878$; $df = 16$; $p = 0.006$). Correlation analysis revealed that younger individuals consume Balkan cultural content somewhat more frequently than older individuals (slight negative correlation: $r = -0.123$; $p = 0.001$).

Table 6. Consumption of cultural content from the selected regions

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Much	Very much	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Central Europe	3.3	14.9	42.3	29.4	10.1	3.28	0.949
Mediterranean	3.3	14.7	41.2	28.5	12.3	3.32	0.978
Balkans	17.3	28.9	33.1	14.3	6.4	2.63	1.117

Interestingly, respondents perceive Central Europe and the Mediterranean as culturally superior to Croatia to a moderate extent (Table 7). In contrast, more than half of respondents do not consider Balkan culture superior at all. Chi-square and correlation analyses revealed no statistically significant differences regarding sociodemographic characteristics. The absence of significant differences here points to a broad consensus among respondents regarding the perceived cultural position of the Balkans in relation to Croatia.

Table 7. Perceived cultural superiority of selected regions in relation to Croatia

	Not at all	A little	Moderately	Much	Very much	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Central Europe	9.6	10.3	28.9	36.1	15.1	3.37	1.15

Mediterranean	13.6	15.6	43.4	22.4	5	2.9	1.057
Balkans	58.7	18.4	19.1	2	1.8	1.7	0.961

5. Discussion

5.1. Geography textbooks

Primary and secondary school textbooks undergo a ministry approval process and peer review; thus, it can be argued that their content represents the desired educational narrative. Consequently, the framing of Croatia as a Central European and Mediterranean country suggests an alignment with official state policy, rather than merely authorial interpretation. Moving away from Southeast Europe or the Balkans, reflecting the terminological choices in the examined materials, indicates a need to distance the country from a “problematic” regional identity rather than a denial of the past. This institutional shift aligns with Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš (2015), who note that Central Europe was strategically revived post-Cold War as a symbolic refuge from the perceived Balkan vacuum.

Regarding university textbooks, verification is much more liberal due to university autonomy. However, the foundational textbook by Magaš (2013) defines Croatia as Central European and Mediterranean, indicating that future geography teachers are socialised within these conclusions. Experts educated in this context eventually participate in bodies verifying textbooks for lower levels. While Magaš provides a standard framework, Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš (2015) highlight the complexity of historical processes, underscoring that regional boundaries are not fixed geographical facts but political constructions. Official educational narratives seek to stabilise these boundaries by prioritising specific civilisational legacies over others.

5.2. Official state acts

The constitutional prohibition of joining any Balkan political associations highlights Croatia’s political distancing from any Balkan identity. This stance gains additional weight when considering the pejorative connotations of the term Balkans in contrast to the more neutral Southeast Europe. As Todorova (2006) argues, the Balkan label has been historically burdened with negative characteristics, leading nations in the region to prioritise Central European affiliation. Moreover, *the National Security Strategy* appears to reinforce this by framing the region as a “Southeastern Neighbourhood”, implying it represents a security challenge. With the exception of *the Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy*, which focuses on the Mediterranean, the analysed acts consistently define Croatia as Central European and Mediterranean.

However, certain inconsistencies regarding Croatia’s political and economic role suggest that, despite its declarative commitments, the state is aware of its functional attachment to the Balkan/Southeast European sphere, where, with its population and economic size and recent historical ties, it can impose itself much more easily than in the regions to which it claims to belong. This dynamic illustrates Croatia’s position within Europe-in-between (Kuus, 2014; Tunjić, 2004; Zarycki, 2014), a space where nations constantly negotiate their status by balancing 'core' European aspirations against regional functional ties. For example, it is self-evident that Zagreb Airport, as a transport hub, can compete much more easily with Belgrade than with Frankfurt or Rome.

Consequently, Croatia’s state-political orientation is not merely an expression of long-standing historical relations that predate the Yugoslav era, but also a strategic aversion towards the Balkan legacy. This institutional bordering process supports Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš’s (2015) observation that regional labels are often utilised as tools for political distancing from a problematic past, where the Mediterranean and Central Europe serve as symbolic safe havens from regional instability. In this sense, place branding acts as a discursive construction (Kavaratzis et al., 2015) that facilitates the formal institutional bordering process (Paasi, 2019), where the state actively redefines the nation’s symbolic geography to align with preferred civilisational norms.

4.3. Tourism promotion

Considering the fact that the majority of foreign visitors visit the Adriatic part of Croatia, the higher representation of the Mediterranean in promotional materials is expected. However, other regions are represented beyond their actual

share in tourism results. This suggests that the Croatian Tourist Board (CNTB) is attempting to present the “other” Croatia to encourage more balanced regional development. Nonetheless, the importance of the Mediterranean remains unquestionable, especially since all eight of Croatia’s UNESCO-protected cultural heritage sites are located in coastal Croatia (UNESCO, 2025). This emphasis indicates that the Mediterranean identity is utilised as the central tool for international branding, framing the sea as a “cradle of national culture” (Rihtman-Auguštin, 1999).

The inclusion of EU membership in promotional videos serves to position Croatia as a space of security and stability within the European context. Carefully selected cultural, musical, and gastronomic content, such as the Mediterranean rhythms found in twelve of the videos, further strengthens this branding. While the CNTB utilises Mediterranean aesthetics for marketing, for the local population, this identity appears to act as a civilisational anchor. Beyond the “sun and sea” commodity, the Mediterranean identity reflects what Matvejević (2007) describes as a unique spatial logic and shared mentality.

In this context, the Mediterranean can be interpreted as a symbolic counterweight to the volatile political narratives of the Balkans, offering a permanent cultural framework that persists regardless of changing political borders or state strategies. Moreover, the fact that most content relates to the coast confirms that the official promotional narrative views Croatia primarily as a Mediterranean country.

4.4. Media reports

The relative limited media interest in Croatia’s regional affiliation may stem from the nature of the daily news, which prioritises current events over geographical or academic precision. However, it is surprising that Zagreb-based *Jutarnji list*, a media outlet of national importance, pays significantly more attention to Croatia’s regional profiling than the distinctly regional *Slobodna Dalmacija* or *Glas Slavonije*. The lower prevalence of Mediterranean emphasis in *Slobodna Dalmacija* suggests that such an identity is taken for granted in Split, requiring less explicit discursive reinforcement.

Given its geographical location, the priority this daily gives to Central European narratives over Balkan ones indicates a strategy of symbolic distancing. As Lalić (2003) notes regarding Split’s social fragmentations, the city’s urban identity is often constructed in opposition to its hinterland (Zagora), which is symbolically coded as Balkan. This label functions as a cultural signifier of a retrograde, non-urban mentality from which Split’s Mediterranean self-image maintains a boundary. Such spatial bordering reflects Matvejević’s (2007) interpretation of the Mediterranean coastal mentality viewing the hinterland as retrograde and culturally inferior—a dynamic that Todorova (2006) identifies as “internal Balkanism”, where regional actors use the Balkan label to stigmatise the “other” within their own borders.

Croatia is not primarily recognised as a Central European country in any content category. Indicatively, in terms of economic dynamics, it is primarily characterised as a Mediterranean country, largely due to the importance of tourism on the Adriatic coast—the country’s Mediterranean façade. Beyond tourism, Croatia is economically Mediterranean from a geostrategic perspective, as the Adriatic coast serves as a fundamental alternative energy route for both Croatia and Central Europe. The economic weight is further reinforced by the media’s view of Croatia as Mediterranean in a climatological sense.

Conversely, in a political and cultural sense, the media recognises Croatia much more as part of the Balkans. This reflects the persistent Cold War geopolitical lens identified by Cohen (2003), where media narratives—often driven by current events rather than historical nuances—revert to the Balkan label when discussing regional instability or political dynamics, regardless of official state efforts to shift the discourse towards Central Europe.

4.5. Survey

The results suggest that Croatian respondents position their country at the crossroads of multiple regional identities, with a moderate sense of affiliation with both Central Europe and the Balkans, and a somewhat stronger connection to the Mediterranean. This positioning confirms the interpretation of Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš (2015) interpretation of Croatia as a “border country” exposed to overlapping cultural spheres. While Dalmatian respondents unsurprisingly identify most strongly with the Mediterranean (109 out of 137), younger participants show a stronger inclination towards the Balkans in perceived common history, travel frequency and cultural consumption. This generational shift can be explained through popular geopolitics (Dittmer, 2019). Specifically, this empirical finding anchors the study within

broader debates on identity construction, demonstrating how youth engage in a bottom-up re-regionalisation through cultural consumption.

Younger respondents are more engaged with linguistically accessible digital content and media from the wider Balkan sphere. Conversely, older respondents more often associate Croatia with Central Europe—an orientation reflecting educational, historical, and political narratives emphasising Central European heritage and EU integration. This generation's stronger distance from a Balkan identity stems from the Yugoslav experience, where Balkan (especially Serbian) culture was perceived as a threat to national distinctiveness rather than romantically. Thus, the older generation's perspective corresponds more closely to official state acts and geography textbooks' interpretations, notably Magaš's (2013) textbook, who generationally aligns who maintain a distinct distance from the Balkans. This attitude confirms Todorova's (2006) thesis that Croats emphasise Central European heritage as a barrier against the Balkans.

Overall, the findings illustrate that cultural identification in Croatia is not uniform but generationally and regionally differentiated. However, the importance hierarchy of identity does not correspond to the image provided by official state acts. The Mediterranean dimension remains the most stable and prevailing reference point, especially in the coastal regions of Dalmatia, Istria and Primorje. The surprisingly high level of identification with the Mediterranean in Zagreb, which deviates from its geographical position, can be explained by migrations from coastal Croatia, driven notably—though not exclusively—by employment opportunities in the state administration. This concentration of coastal population within the institutional centre directly influences identity perceptions and the city's lifestyle. Here, Mediterranean identity is not a top-down construct, but a reflection of the demographic reality.

The regional distribution of Central European and Balkan identities aligns with historical impacts. The high commitment to Balkan identity in Istria and Primorje is interpreted through the lens of migrations—specifically the influx of a workforce from other former Yugoslav republics during the industrial and urban growth of the second half of the 20th century. Over time, these demographic shifts shaped a social fabric where Balkan affiliation is less stigmatised and aligns with a specific left-leaning worldview. These differences correspond to Glamuzina and Fuerst-Bjeliš's (2015) view of Croatia as a border country exposed to multiple influences. These findings reflect the complexity of regional and border identities (Paasi, 2019), where boundaries are lived experiences rather than mere lines on a map. In this context, Croatian identity is a layered construct where Mediterranean, Central European, and Balkan influences coexist with varying intensities, forming a multidimensional sense of place (Scott & Sohn, 2018).

Regarding age differences, younger generations appear more open to Balkan cultural influences, suggesting that media consumption patterns continue to reshape perceptions of regional belonging. Such forms of “everyday regionalism” can foster a sense of shared identity that transcends political borders, particularly in the post-Yugoslav context. However, this cultural diffusion can also be interpreted as a form of cultural colonisation or as a strategy of popular geopolitics. Within this framework, the dominance of regional cultural products functions as a “soft power”, redefining geopolitical influence through everyday consumption (Dittmer, 2019). Consequently, Balkan culture—most notably Serbian, with its distinct regional characteristics—imposes itself as a barrier against globalisation while simultaneously extending Serbia's influence over neighbouring countries through popular culture, particularly music.

As Baker (2006) argues, this transnational flow of pop-folk narratives often bypasses state-controlled cultural boundaries, allowing Serbian popular music to colonise the regional market by positioning itself as a more authentic and resilient alternative to global trends. Since Croatia, and specifically Dalmatia (Čaleta, 1999), already possessed recognisable music as a core identity pillar, the more pronounced consumption of Balkan cultural content among the youth suggests that globalisation has exerted a deeper influence on Croatian music than on its Serbian counterpart, which is emerging as a preferred alternative. Nevertheless, the slight majority preference for a Mediterranean identity supports Matvejević's (2007) claim regarding the climate impact on identity formation.

6. Conclusions

This research demonstrates the existence of multiple, competing identity perceptions regarding Croatia's regional affiliation. The originality of this study lies in its triangulation of diverse discursive sources—education, state policy, media, tourism promotion, and public surveys—within the same timeframe. The multi-layered analysis reveals a measurable gap between official positioning and public perceptions: while state policy prioritises a Central Europe – Mediterranean – Balkans hierarchy, citizens exhibit a preference for a Mediterranean – Balkans – Central Europe sequence. This approach corroborates that the discrepancy between official and public narratives remains a persistent feature, providing contemporary insight into how these perceptions continue to manifest despite recent political and social

transformations that might otherwise have altered them. This gap confirms that regional belonging in transition zones cannot be viewed through rigid geopolitical divisions, but rather as a dynamic process of constant negotiation between institutional frameworks and the lived reality of individuals.

The primary contribution of this paper is the empirical mapping of this identity gap and the confirmation of Croatia as a layered construct of identity located within the “in-between Europe” – a space of transition and overlap. By systematising these diverse discursive layers, the research provides a clear framework for understanding how transition zones navigate competing regional affiliations. The findings demonstrate that contemporary Croatia lacks a singular self-perception, functioning instead as a space where various regional frameworks interweave into a multidimensional sense of place, characterised by varying intensities across regional and generational lines. Beyond the national context, this study enhances the broader geographical understanding of European transition zones and borderland identities, where boundaries are lived experiences rather than mere lines on a map. Croatia serves as a pertinent example of how nations situated between major regions navigate multiple spatial identities. This research offers insights into the fluid nature of regional boundaries, illustrating the dynamic interaction between official institutional narratives and broader social identifications.

Specifically, the data highlights that while the Balkan label is often avoided in official discourse as a form of strategic distancing from a perceived “Otherness”, it remains a recognised historical and cultural reality for the public. Among younger generations, this identity is increasingly redefined through everyday regionalism and pop-cultural exchange. Amidst these shifting loyalties, the Mediterranean emerges as the most consistent and culturally stable point of reference for Croatia’s contemporary self-perception.

The practical implications of these results point towards the potential for a strategic Mediterranean rebranding. Since Mediterranean identity is the dominant sense of belonging among the general public and is already present in state narratives, its promotion offers a coherent path for the country’s international image. Such rebranding is not merely a marketing choice but is deeply rooted in the established identity hierarchy of Croatian society. For future research in human geography, these findings provide a foundation for exploring the spatial manifestations of this regional hybridity. Future studies could focus on how these invisible regional borders are reflected in mental maps or investigate the impact of cross-border cultural consumption on regional identification. Longitudinal studies would be valuable to track how this borderland identity evolves as generational shifts further emphasise the inherent porosity of regional boundaries and the increasing complexity of multi-layered affiliations.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Acknowledges: The author utilised AI-based tools solely for linguistic refinement and text condensation. These tools were not used to generate or alter the scientific data, interpretations, or conclusions. The final version of the manuscript was thoroughly reviewed and approved by the author.

Data Availability Statement: The materials and data used in this article can be accessed via the links presented in the Appendix below.

Supplementary Materials: The full list of survey questions is available at this link: [Questionnaire](#)

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix

1. Official State Acts:

Ministry of Culture and Media (2023). *The National Plan for the Development of Culture and Media for the period from 2023 to 2027*. Retrieved from: https://min-kulture.gov.hr/UserDocImages/dokumenti/Nacionalni%20plan%20razvoja%20kulture%20i%20medija/Nacionalni%20plan_objava.pdf

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990). *Official Gazette, 85/10* (Consolidated text, with amendments up to 2010). Retrieved from <https://www.zakon.hr/z/94/ustav-republike-hrvatske>

The National Development Strategy of the Republic of Croatia until 2030 (2021). *Official Gazette, 13/21*. Retrieved from: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2021_02_13_230.html

The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Croatia (2017). *Official Gazette, 73/17*. Retrieved from: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2017_07_73_1772.html

The Sustainable Tourism Development Strategy until 2030 (2023). *Official Gazette*, 2/23. Retrieved from: https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/full/2023_01_2_18.html

2. Tourism promotion videos:

- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2011, March 27). *Croatia* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e32FguNX6IE>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2011, March 27). *Croatia – Croatian National Tourist Board* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1T06gMI6sbQ>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2016, March 6). *Croatia – Full of Life* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ma-KLTn4mDc>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2017, November 7). *Croatia Full of Life – Ambassadors of Croatian tourism* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OXbIR7e9PYM>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2011, March 27). *Croatia – Hrvatska turistička zajednica* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IXxV2omnlY4>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2013, April 24). *Croatia – the New Tourism Star of the European Union* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFGdO5NtF2M>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2012, May 19). *Croatia – Your life, Your time, Your experience* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=moGek55wn1U>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2011, March 27). *Hrvatska – Hrvatska turistička zajednica* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyBn9iuFy5I>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2012, November 30). *Hrvatska Turistička Zajednica – Fairytale Croatia* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVaPftSoGbU>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2009, March 23). *Hrvatska turistička zajednica – hrvatska hrana (Croatian food)* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66bWxjlb9CM>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2010, March 13). *Kad srce kaže ljeto, kaže...Hrvatska!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWRsMuWmjUO>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2017, April 7). *Parkovi Hrvatske* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTE5z6tFM3A>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2010, April 12). *Reklama Hrvatske turističke zajednice 2010* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=faEnfwhQ2Lw>
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2012, March 27). *Turistički spot Hrvatska* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twN4_rHluo
- Hrvatska turistička zajednica. (2015, March 23). *Visit Croatia* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARkVqdZfHFw>

3. Media reports list:

- Ban, B. (2025, March 28). Kreće bespoštedna bitka, ovo je jedna od najvećih prijetnji sezoni u Hrvatskoj: ‘Sada su oni nova zvijezda Mediterana...’. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/krece-bespostedna-bitka-ovo-je-jedna-od-najvecih-prijetnji-sezoni-u-hrvatskoj-sada-su-oni-nova-zvijezda-mediterana-15567786>
- ‘Cijene su nam rasle duplo brže od Mediterana, Grčka i Španjolska su jeftinije od nas, tako dalje ne ide!’. (2025, April 28). *Jutarnji list*. <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/aktualno/cijene-su-nam-rasle-duplo-brze-od-mediterana-grcka-i-spanjolska-su-jeftinije-od-nas-tako-dalje-ne-ide-15549967>
- Crnjak, M. (2025, April 28). Stigle prve službene brojke. Amerika na putu prema novom teškom slomu, profitirat će Mediteran - pa tako i Hrvatska?. *Jutarnji list*. <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/aktualno/stigle-prve-sluzbene-brojke-amerika-na-putu-prema-novom-teskom-slomu-profitirat-ce-mediteran-pa-tako-i-hrvatska-15578332>
- Crnjak, M., & Zupčić, K. (2025, March 28). Na konferenciji Jutarnjeg ministar Glavina naglasio važnost održivosti: ‘Kvaliteta života sugrađana važnija od svega ostalog’. *Jutarnji list*. <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/aktualno/na-konferenciji-jutarnjeg-ministar-glavina-naglasio-vaznost-odrzivosti-kvaliteta-zivota-sugradana-ipak-vaznija-od-svega-ostalog-15567840>
- [G.S.] (2025, April 25). Hrvatski turizam boljim čine ljudi koji u njega ulažu svoj novac, znanje i vrijeme. *Glas Slavonije*. https://www.glas-slavonije.hr/novosti/hrvatska/2025/04/25/hrvatski-turizam-boljim-cine-ljudi-koji-u-njega-ulazu-svoj-novac-znanje-i-vrijeme-690575/#google_vignette
- ‘I Split i Balkan, kao i Palestina, nose u sebi priče o nepravdi, sukobima i borbi za bolju budućnost’. (2025, April 28). *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/kultura/glazba/i-split-i-balkan-kao-i-palestina-nose-u-sebi-price-o-nepravdi-sukobima-i-borbi-za-bolju-buducnost-15545579>
- Katalinić, D. (2025, April 27). Milun i Bogdan o financijskoj pismenosti: Ljudi moraju biti svjesni da nema brze zarade i da uvijek postoji mogućnost gubitka. *Glas Slavonije*. <https://www.glas-slavonije.hr/novosti/hrvatska/2025/04/27/milun-i-bogdan-o-financijskoj-pismenosti-ljudi-moraju-biti-svjesni-da-nema-brze-zarade-i-da-uvijek-postoji-mogucnost-gubitka-690952/>

- Klepo, M. (2025, March 18). Ministar Primorac: 'Hrvatska će postati regionalno središte za IPO-e u srednjoj i istočnoj Europi'. *Jutarnji list*. <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/aktualno/ministar-primorac-hrvatska-ce-postati-regionalno-srediste-za-ipo-e-u-srednjoj-i-istocnoj-europi-15564301>
- Klepo, M. (2025, March 28). Stigli novi podaci: Hrvatska iza sebe ostavila četiri države EU, izjednačili smo se s Mađarima! *Jutarnji list*. <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/aktualno/stigli-novi-podaci-hrvatska-iza-sebe-ostavila-cetiri-drzave-eu-izjednacili-smo-se-s-madarima-15567736>
- Knezović Belan, P. (2025, March 20). Prvi put u svom životu, i u 30 godina rada, vidim da je jednoj gradskoj upravi kultura bitna. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/kultura/knjizevnost/prvi-put-u-svom-zivotu-i-u-30-godina-rada-vidim-da-je-jednoj-gradskoj-upravi-kultura-bitna-15564983>
- Koretić, D. (2025, April 22). Opet kreću vlakovi prema Jadranu, no ovaj put ne iz Češke: 'Karte će koštati samo 50 €, računamo da će i Hrvati dolaziti k nama'. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/opet-krecu-vlakovi-prema-jadranu-no-ovaj-put-ne-iz-ceske-karte-ce-kostati-samo-50-racunamo-da-ce-i-hrvati-dolaziti-k-nama-15576430>
- Kujek, D. (2025, April 4). Milanović sudjelovao na "Aqaba procesu" usmjerenom na sigurnost u jugoistočnoj Europi. *Glas Slavonije*. <https://glas-slavonije.hr/novosti/svijet/2025/04/04/milanovic-sudjelovao-na-aqaba-procesu-usmjerenom-na-sigurnost-u-jugoistocnoj-europi-686568/>
- [L.G.] (2025, January 13). Politico: 'Proruski kandidat pobijedio u nekontroverznoj balkanskoj zemlji!'; Borzan reagirala: 'Vidim što se događa'. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/politico-proruski-kandidat-pobijedio-u-nekontroverznoj-balkanskoj-zemlji-borzan-reagirala-vidim-sto-se-dogada-15542050?cx linkref=jl home teme dana>
- Majetić, D. (2025, January 4). Nije samo ludnica mjesto gdje nalazimo poremećene umove. *Glas Slavonije*. <https://www.glas-slavonije.hr/magazin/2025/01/04/nije-samo-ludnica-mjesto-gdje-nalazimo-poremecene-umove-665066/>
- Mihoci, B. (2025, March 28). Božinović: Za unutarnju sigurnost važna suradnja sa zapadnim Balkanom. *Glas Slavonije*. <https://glas-slavonije.hr/novosti/hrvatska/2025/03/28/bozinovic-za-unutarnju-sigurnost-vazna-suradnja-sa-zapadnim-balkanom-684939/>
- Palokaj, A. (2025, April 9). U jeku katastrofalnih odnosa Europe i SAD-a primjećuje se velika promjena u Bruxellesu. Balkan bi bio prvi na nišanu. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/u-jeku-katastrofalnih-odnosa-europe-i-sad-a-primjecuje-se-velika-promjena-u-bruxellesu-balkan-bi-bio-prvi-na-nisanu-15571813>
- [R.D.] (2025, March 25). Ne perite aute, manje se krećite po otvorenom: Stiže saharski pijesak, evo dokad će ga biti u atmosferi iznad Hrvatske. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/ne-perite-aute-manje-se-krecite-po-otvorenom-stize-saharski-pijesak-evo-dokad-ce-ga-biti-u-atmosferi-iznad-hrvatske-15566896>
- Saharski pijesak stiže u Hrvatsku, Dalmacija posebno na udaru. Može biti vrlo štetan za zdravlje, evo kako se zaštititi. (2025, March 25). *Jutarnji list*. <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/saharski-pijesak-stize-u-hrvatsku-dalmacija-posebno-na-udaru-moze-biti-vrlo-stetan-za-zdravlje-evo-kako-se-zastititi-1463814>
- Sjajne vijesti za Hrvatsku: Premijer Plenković će predsjedavati velikom i moćnom organizacijom koja okuplja 13 država! (2025, April 28). *Slobodna Dalmacija*. <https://slobodnadalmacija.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/sjajne-vijesti-za-hrvatsku-premijer-plenkovic-ce-predsjedavati-velikom-i-mocnom-organizacijom-koja-okuplja-13-drzava-1471984>
- Šolić, I. (2025, February 10). Hrvatskoj uskoro prijete velika zima!?: 'Ruski medo mogao bi malo zamahnuti šapom...' *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/hrvatska/hrvatskoj-uskoro-prijete-velika-zima-ruski-medo-mogao-bi-malo-zamahnuti-sapom-15551887>
- Trumbetaš, V. (2025, April 28). Hrvatska želi nabaviti dva najmoćnija ratna broda u svojoj povijesti. Istražili smo što se nudi, koliko košta i kako su naoružani. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/svijet/hrvatska-zeli-nabaviti-dva-najmocnija-ratna-broda-u-svojoj-povijesti-istrazili-smo-sto-se-nudi-koliko-kosta-i-kako-su-naoruzani-15578305>
- [Z.K.] (2025, March 24). Viđena je kod Korčule i Mljeta, otrovna je, a njen ubod dovodi do ludila. Moramo se naviknuti da je odsad dio Jadrana. *Jutarnji list*. <https://www.jutarnji.hr/vaumijau/novosti/ugodno-zive-u-jadranu-unistavaju-sve-pred-sobom-a-zalude-su-opasne-15565904>
- Zupičić, K. (2025, April 29). Cijene nekretnina u Hrvatskoj rasle dvostruko brže od prosjeka EU, Mađarima je najteže, samo u jednoj državi najam pojeftinio. *Jutarnji list*. <https://novac.jutarnji.hr/novac/aktualno/cijene-nekretnina-u-hrvatskoj-rasle-dvostruko-brze-od-prosjeka-eu-madarima-je-najteze-samo-u-jednoj-drzavi-najam-pojeftinio-15578975>

4. Survey Questionnaire:

The data supporting the findings of this survey are available from the author upon reasonable request. Individual responses are not publicly available due to privacy and confidentiality agreements.

References

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso.
- Anholt, S. (2010). *Places: Identity, Image and Reputation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Baker, C. (2006). The Politics of Performance: Transnationalism and its Limits in Former Yugoslav Popular Music, 1999–2004. *Ethnopolitics*, 5(3), 275–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449050600911075>
- Baker, C. (2010). *Sounds of the borderland: Popular music, war and nationalism in Croatia since 1991*. Ashgate.
- Banini, T., & Ilovan, O.-R. (2021). Introduction: Dealing with territorial/place identity representations. In T. Banini & O.-R. Ilovan (Eds.), *Representing place and territorial identities in Europe: Discourses, images, and practices* (pp. 1–18). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66766-5_1
- Cohen, S. B. (2003). *Geopolitics of the World System*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Curić, Z., Glamuzina, N., & Opačić, V. T. (2013). *Geografija turizma* [Geography of tourism]. Naklada Ljevak.
- Cvijić, J. (1922). *Balkansko poluostvoro i južnoslovenske zemlje: Osnove antropogeografije, knjiga prva* [The Balkan Peninsula and South Slavic lands: Foundations of anthropogeography, book one]. Hrvatski štamparski zavod.
- Čokonaj, E., & Feletar, D. (2014). *Geografija 2: udžbenik iz geografije za 2. razred srednjih strukovnih škola* [Geography 2: Geography textbook for the 2nd grade of vocational secondary schools]. Meridijani.
- Čokonaj, E., & Vuk, R. (2014). *Turistička geografija Hrvatske: udžbenik iz geografije za srednje turističke škole* [Tourism geography of Croatia: Geography textbook for secondary tourism schools]. Meridijani.
- Čaleta, J. (1999). The ethnomusicological approach to the concept of the Mediterranean in music in Croatia. *Narodna umjetnost*, 36(1), 183–195. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/53534>
- de Jong, M., & Lu, H. (2022). City branding, regional identity and public space: What historical and cultural symbols in urban architecture reveal. *Global Public Policy and Governance*, 2(2), 203–231. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43508-022-00043-0>
- Dittmer, J., & Bos, A. (2019). *Popular Culture, Geopolitics, and Identity*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Dugin, A. (2004). *Osnovi geopolitike: Knjiga 1: Geopolitička budućnost Rusije* [Foundations of geopolitics: Book 1: The geopolitical future of Russia]. Ekopres.
- Dugin, A. (2017). *Geopolitika multipolarnoga svijeta* [Geopolitics of the multipolar world]. Zadruga Eneagram.
- Gal, H., Jukopila, D., & Kralj, P. (2021). *Geo 4: udžbenik geografije u četvrtom razredu gimnazija i strukovnih škola* [Geo 4: Geography textbook for the fourth grade of grammar and vocational schools]. Školska knjiga.
- Gambiroža, I., Jukić, J., Marin, D., & Mesić, A. (2020). *Moja Zemlja 1: udžbenik iz geografije za peti razred osnovne škole* [My Earth 1: Geography textbook for the fifth grade of primary school]. Alfa.
- Glamuzina, N., & Fuerst-Bjeliš, B. (2015). *Historijska geografija Hrvatske* [Historical geography of Croatia]. Sveučilište u Splitu: Filozofski fakultet.
- Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (Eds.) (2012). *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jean, C. (2012). *Geopolitica del mondo contemporaneo* [Geopolitics of the contemporary world]. Editori Laterza
- Kavaratzis, M., Warnaby, G., & Ashworth, G. J. (eds.) (2015). *Rethinking Place Branding: Comprehensive Brand Development for Cities and Regions*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-12424-7>
- King, B., Richards, G., & Chu, A. M. C. (2025). Developing a tourism region through tourism and culture: Bordering, branding, placemaking and governance processes. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 50(1), 24–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2207156>
- Kuus, M. (2014). *Geopolitics and Expertise: Knowledge and Authority in European Diplomacy*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Lalić, D. (2003). *Split kontra Splita: Pogled sociologa na probleme jednoga grada* [Split versus Split: A sociologist's view on the problems of a city]. Naklada Jesenski i Turk.
- Lu, H., de Jong, M., Song, Y., & Zhao, M. (2020). The multi-level governance of formulating regional brand identities: Evidence from three Mega City Regions in China. *Cities*, 104, 102668. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2020.102668>
- Magaš, D. (2013). *Geografija Hrvatske* [Geography of Croatia]. University of Zadar, Meridijani.
- Matvejević, P. (2007). *Mediterranski brevijar* [Mediterranean breviary]. VBZ.
- Melegh, A. (2006). *On the East-West Slope: Globalization, Nationalism, Racism and Discourses on Central and Eastern Europe*. Central European University Press.
- Melissen, J. (Ed.) (2005). *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Morgado, N. (2023). Modelling neoclassical geopolitics: An alternative theoretical tradition for geopolitical culture and literacy. *European Journal of Geography*, 14(4), 13–21. <https://doi.org/10.48088/ejg.n.mor.14.4.013.021>
- Orešić, D., Tišma, I., Vuk, R., & Buljan, A. (2020). *Gea 1: udžbenik geografije u petom razredu osnovne škole* [Gea 1: Geography textbook for the fifth grade of primary school]. Školska knjiga.

- Orešić, D., Tišma, I., Vuk, R., & Buljan, A. (2021). *Gea 3: udžbenik geografije u sedmom razredu osnovne škole* [Gea 3: Geography textbook for the seventh grade of primary school]. Školska knjiga.
- Paasi, A. (2009). The resurgence of the 'Region' and 'Regional Identity': Theoretical perspectives and empirical observations on regional dynamics in Europe. *Review of International Studies*, 35(S1), 121–146. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210509008456>
- Paasi, A. (2019). Afterword: Mobilities, Place, and Beyond. *Journal of Finnish Studies*, 22, 283–289. <https://doi.org/10.5406/28315081.22.1.2.15>
- Petrović, N., Bilić, J., & Fila, F. (2022). Kulturno-civilizacijske i geopolitičke orijentacije hrvatskih stranaka i građana [Cultural-civilisational and geopolitical orientations of Croatian parties and citizens]. *Političke analize*, 11(41), 50–63. <https://hrcak.srce.hr/file/403839>
- Relph, E. (2008). *Place and Placelessness*. Pion.
- Rihtman-Auguštin (1999). A Croatian controversy: Mediterranean-Danube-Balkans. *Narodna umjetnost*, 36(1), 103–119.
- Rivera, L. A. (2008). Managing "Spoiled" National Identity: War, Tourism, and Memory in Croatia. *American Sociological Review*, 73(4), 613–634. <https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240807300405>
- Rotaru, M.-A., Crețan, R., & Ianăș, A.-N. (2023). Ethnicities in Post-Communist Romania: Spatial Dynamics, Fractionalisation, and Polarisation at the NUTS-3 Level. *Land*, 12(6), 1133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/land12061133>
- Săgeată, R., & Crețan, R. (2025). The Role of Territorial Cohesion and Administrative Organization in Regional Sustainability: The Case of Romania. *Sustainability*, 17(20), 9006. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su17209006>
- Scott, J. W., & Sohn, C. (2018). Place-making and the bordering of urban space: Interpreting the emergence of new neighbourhoods in Berlin and Budapest. *European Urban and Regional Studies*, 26(3), 297–313. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0969776418764577>
- Sohn, C. (2022). How to brand a border despite its wall? A social semiotics approach to cross-border place branding. *Geoforum*, 135, 82–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2022.07.016>
- Stroschein, S. (2012). *Ethnic Struggle, Coexistence, and Democratization in Eastern Europe*. Cambridge University Press.
- Todorova, M. (2006). *Imaginarni Balkan* [Imagining the Balkans]. Biblioteka XX vek, Krug.
- Tomić-Koludrović, I., & Petrić, M. (2007). Da societa in transizione a societa mista: la Croazia tra due modernizzazioni [From society in transition to mixed society: Croatia between two modernisations]. In F. Botta, I. Garzia, & P. Guaragnella (Eds.), *La questione adriatica e l'allargamento dell'Unione europea* [The Adriatic question and the enlargement of the European Union] (pp. 127–161). Franco Angeli.
- Tunjić, F. (2004). *Vmesna Evropa: Konfliktnost državnih teritorialnih meja* [Europe-in-between: Conflictuality of state territorial borders]. Univerza na Primorskem, Znanstveno-raziskovalno središče, Zgodovinsko društvo za južno Primorsko.
- UNESCO (2025, July): *Croatia*. <https://whc.unesco.org/en/statesparties/hr>
- Zarycki, T. (2014). *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315819006>
- Zupančič, J. (2015). *Geografija Balkana in njegova obrobja* [Geography of the Balkans and its periphery]. Znanstvena založba Filozofske fakultete.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of EUROGEO and/or the editor(s). EUROGEO and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.